

# Selection in the South African public service

## Ideal and reality

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### ABSTRACT

In an ideal public service all South Africans would receive professional and efficient service. However, the reality reveals the contrary. This article provides an overview of the critical role that the selection committees play in appointing competent and qualified candidates amidst the pressures of institutional politics in the South African public service. This article reports on research that was conducted to determine the extent to which the decisions of selection committees influence the effectiveness of public service institutions. The authors argue that it would be challenging for selection committees to appoint competent and qualified candidates in an environment that is polarised by political dominance. The findings reveal that institutional political interference and lack of capacity are the major impediments in the appointment of qualified and competent candidates. The authors of this article propose a model that would enable public managers to make decisions that are in the best interest of public institutions and communities.

### INTRODUCTION

The influence of politics in the selection and appointment of candidates in the public service has come under scrutiny from different quarters of civil society

and the media lately. Recently there has been a case of a senior official in the South African Broadcasting Corporation who was appointed without the required qualifications and competencies. Many other cases of poor decisions made by selection committees have been reported elsewhere in the country. In his February 2011 State of the Nation Address, President Jacob Zuma urged government officials to appoint competent and qualified candidates (Zuma 2011). It remains to be seen whether his words are mere rhetoric or whether serious steps will be taken to improve poor decisions taken by selection committees in the public service. Morse (2011:1) argues that institutions expend large sums of money in attracting and retaining competent employees, and if employees do not add value to the effectiveness and competitiveness of institutions, the institutions stand to lose return on investment. Cook (2009:4–5) contends that the best qualified employees are twice as productive as ordinary employees. Campbell and Campbell (in Kahn 2005:97–104) agree, stating that human resources are an institution's largest cost item. Therefore, the effects of errors in selection do not only reflect adversely on the institution, but also deplete scarce resources. Selection is a process of determining which individuals will best match particular positions in the institutional context, taking into account individual differences, requirements for the job and the organisation's internal and external environments (Swanepoel, Erasmus, Van Wyk and Schenk 2003:311). Thus, institutions should appoint the right candidate in the right position.

The shortage of talented people in South Africa and the inability of the public service to compete with the private sector in attracting and retaining competent and qualified candidates have compounded the challenges of selection in the public service (Van Dijk 2008:389–390). Talented people are expected to display a set of competencies that include knowledge, experience and personal traits demonstrated by defined behaviours (Roslinah 2009:1). Kahn and Louw (2010:179) state that talent is the employees' ability and competencies that form an institution's capability, which is a critical success factor in a highly competitive environment, and talent generates high performance which in turn attracts new talent.

Section 195(i) of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996 (hereafter referred to as the Constitution) provides that public administration must be broadly representative of the demographic distribution of the South African people, with employment of personnel management practices based on ability, objectivity and fairness. It means that all candidates should be treated equally and fairly with respect to their abilities, competencies and potential. The characteristics outlined in the Constitution should be augmented with predetermined job requirements. Such augmentation would result in a better match between candidate, job requirements and organisational culture (Beardwell and Holden 2001:245–247).

In the research on which this article reports, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. In this article the extent to which selection committees' decisions in appointing competent and qualified candidates influence public service institutions effectiveness are analysed. The aim of the research was to explore how the reality selection process differs from the ideal selection process in the public service; how institutional politics influence the decisions of selection committees; and the impact on institutional effectiveness. The discussion below is divided into four sections: the ideal selection process in the public service; the reality of the selection process in the public service; the role played by institutional politics; and a suggested model to improve the selection process. Finally, concluding remarks and recommendations are presented.

## **IDEAL SELECTION PROCESS IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE**

Selection is the process through which institutions make decisions about who will or will not be appointed (Noel, Hollenbeck, Gerhart and Wright 2004:171). Etomi (2002:26) defines selection as a process through which suitable candidates can be considered for appointment by the institution from a pool of aspirant applicants who best match institutional requirements. Gerber, Nel and Van Dyk (1992:235) claim that selection entails choosing individuals from a number of candidates that meet the required standard of performance. Swanepoel *et al.* (2003:311) concur, arguing that selection is based on individual differences. From the definitions provided above it can be concluded that selection is a process through which institutions choose competent and qualified candidates from a pool of available candidates.

The selection process starts with the screening process, which matches candidates with job requirements as per job specification. Those who do not meet the job requirements are excluded from the process. The job description should serve as the foundation on which the screening process should be undertaken and also be executed within the framework of the *Public Service Act* (103 of 1994) which stipulates that applicants cannot be discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation, race, gender and other forms of discrimination. At this stage a candidate's screening should take place on the basis of a completed application form and a submitted curriculum vitae (CV) (Swanepoel *et al.* 2003:150).

The second phase of the selection process is the shortlisting of candidates, which is an attempt to separate candidates who meet the requirements of the job description from those who do not (Foot and Hook 2008:177). The following steps should be followed when compiling a shortlist and the process should be guided by the recruitment and selection policy of the relevant institution:

- At least two people should be involved in constituting the shortlist, namely the relevant manager and a representative from the human resources department.
- Each of these representatives should provide a clear indication of why a candidate that is excluded does not meet the requirements of the job.
- The applicants should then be rated according to predetermined categories of 'unsuitable', 'possibly suitable' and 'suitable'.
- The candidate(s) with the highest rating score is considered the suitable candidate(s) to be invited for interviews.

According to Foot and Hook (2008:177) a list of shortlisted candidates should be drawn up by the shortlisting panel. The list should be forwarded to and discussed with the manager of the relevant department or unit on whose establishment the post is advertised. This discussion should take place before the interview can proceed. After this step, the interview panel is constituted and candidates are then invited for interviews. The selection committee must consist of at least three members who are of a post grading higher than or equal to the vacancy in question. The chairperson of the selection committee must be an employee and must have a higher grading than the grading of the post to be filled. This committee must include adequate representation of previously disadvantaged people (Public Service Regulations 1999:23).

During the interview process candidates are assessed as follows (Cook 2009:10–12):

- The mental ability of each candidate is tested through problem solving, practical judgement and clerical ability.
- Depending on the nature of the job, the physical characteristics of candidates should be assessed.
- Job requirements should be matched with the personality traits of the candidate.
- The interests of the candidate and the values he or she adheres to should fit in with the culture of the institution.
- The candidate should have some degree of knowledge of the job. It is important to test the candidate's tacit knowledge to ascertain the level of general knowledge.
- The candidate should have the necessary competencies and the required skills (interpersonal, communication, persuasion) to do the job.

Candidates are rated based on their responses to the interview questions. The candidate with the highest rating is recommended for appointment. For the selection committee to recommend the right candidate for the right job, it is crucial that the membership of such a committee be representative of the

demographics of the people of South Africa (Van der Westhuizen 2005:120). If not, it creates doubt about the choice of candidates that the selection committee will select. Employees will perceive the selection committee as leaning more towards its own gender and race choices of candidates (Kahn and Louw 2011:678). It compromises the integrity and transparency of the selection process, because it prohibits managers from active participation and critical input during shortlisting and selection processes. The research has shown that 82.6% of respondents are of the view that employment equity should form an integral part of the shortlisting and selection processes (Motsoeneng 2011:81–82).

It cannot be overemphasised that adherence to policies, practices and procedures is critical in ensuring that the institutions select competent and qualified candidates. Therefore, failure to adhere to such policies would imply that some qualified and competent employees are not in the right positions (Robbins and DeCenzo 2001:184). Such appointments would harm the performance of public service institutions, which in turn, would adversely affect service delivery. The next section discusses the reality of the selection process in the public service.

## **REALITY OF THE SELECTION PROCESS IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE**

Selection of qualified candidates in the public service remains a major challenge for the current government. President Jacob Zuma (2011) clearly stated that poor service delivery is an indication that the selection process in the public service is questionable, because it does not produce the right person for the right position. This is underscored by Public Service Commission Report (2010:9) that reveals the key challenge in the recruitment process in the public service is that it does not always result in the selection of the right candidate for the job.

It is the responsibility of the selection committee to ensure that the right candidate is recommended for the right position. On the contrary, research conducted by Motsoeneng (2011:65) indicates that public service selection committees are reluctant to appoint candidates who are more competent and better qualified than they are. It implies that the competencies and qualifications of members of the selection committee become the norm. It creates a pool of candidates that are less likely to compete in the broader South African labour market. This translates into poor service delivery in the public service. Campbell and Campbell (in Kahn 2005:86) argue that public institutions can save financial resources by selecting competent and qualified employees because

appointment of employees represents a financial (Rand-and-cents) investment by the institution. It is therefore understandable that public institutions cannot afford to appoint candidates who are not competent and qualified.

Research conducted by Motsoeneng (2011:71) reveals that there are inconsistencies with regard to the involvement of relevant line managers and unit functional managers in shortlisting and selection committees. This matter is also highlighted by (Gijana 2011:33–34). The Public Service Commission Report (2011:10) agrees, stating that selection committee members often do not have in-depth knowledge of and insight into the job content to determine the suitability of the candidate for the position in question. For example, in the matter of Stoman versus the Minister of Safety and Security, the court ruled that representation is not a determining factor when promotion is being considered, particularly when competing candidates have the same qualifications and competencies. It is therefore imperative that selection committees appoint the most qualified and competent candidates.

The research on which this article is based has revealed that the composition of shortlisting and selection committees in the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) is not representative. This is underscored by the Public Service Commission Report (2011:10), which states that selection committees tended to be male-dominated with little or no representation of women. This could be attributed to the gender imbalances found at senior management levels in the public service (Kahn and Louw 2010:30). The composition of selection committees continues to be plagued with gender inequality. This is revealed by research conducted by the Public Service Commission (2010:21) on the Department of Health. The report highlighted that the Department of Health did not comply with national norms and standards that apply to best practice in the recruitment and selection process. By not following the prescribed sifting process (shortlisting) correctly, the Department of Health may have included candidates that did not meet the requirements of the posts in the final selection process. This may have resulted in the consideration of the candidature of persons who would not be able to perform functions and duties of the positions for which they applied. The oversight on the shortlist process has a direct bearing on the effective functioning of the selection committee. It means that the selection committee may not have been properly constituted and the potential conflicts of interests that selection committee members may have in terms of their relationships with potential candidates may not have been identified. The criteria for selection may not have been appropriately identified and the final decision to appoint a suitable candidate may not have been made by the correct delegated authority. This may result in persons being appointed without meeting the minimum requirements for the position and the possible elimination of candidates that might be suitable for appointment.

Another challenge in the selection process is that of the security vetting process. The literature reveals that security vetting processes are not regularly performed during the shortlisting process. According to the Public Service Commission Report (2011:14) only 12 of the 27 (44%) sampled municipalities complied with the security vetting process. This concurs with Boyle's (2010:4) finding that only 26% of public institutions comply with security vetting processes. Boyle (2010) contends that security vetting should be done on all selected candidates before they assume their duties in the public service. A point in case is that of 53 teachers appointed by the KwaZulu-Natal Education Department and who later turned out to be bogus teachers. These teachers defrauded the department of millions of Rands because the department did not verify their qualifications when they were appointed. The implications go beyond the fruitless expenditure of government funds; it robbed thousands of learners of quality teaching and learning opportunities (Ndlovu 2010).

## **INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS IN DECISION MAKING**

This section examines how institutional politics influence the decision making of selection committees. It highlights two models that serve as a means to guide decisions in the selection process. It concludes by focusing on the impact of institutional politics on the selection process.

Politics refers to the aspiration for and retention of power over a jurisdictional area and its inhabitants by individuals or groups, inherent in which is the authoritative allocation of values in order to regulate or accommodate conflict within the community concerned (Hanekom, Rowland and Bain in Mafunisa 2003:126–127). These authors are of the opinion that when political parties win elections, they are said to be in a position of power where they can impose their values authoritatively on the community. Political values are policies formulated by political office bearers. Models which seek to describe the influence of politics on administration are discussed below.

The first model to be discussed is the dichotomy model. This model holds that any form of political interference in administrative matters would erode the opportunity for administrative efficiency and effectiveness. Mafunisa (2003:87) argues that the policy-making function of the state should be separated from the administrative functions and public servants should have an explicit assignment of objectives before they can begin to develop an efficient administrative system. According to Mafunisa (2003:87) this model is also known as the neutral model of administrative responsibility. He further states that public servants should be neutral in matters of politics, but professionally competent in selecting the appropriate means to carry out policies decided upon by their

political masters. This model sees administration as distinct from politics. The central argument in the dichotomy model is that governments come and go, but the public service remains; therefore, the public service should be characterised by professionalism. The significance of the dichotomy model lies in its intentions to protect public administration from political interference by politicians and members of political parties in their day-to-day administrative activities. The model's intention is to protect public administration from political patronage where party political patronage becomes the dominant criterion in public human resource management functions such as recruitment and selection of candidates (Mafunisa 2003:87–88).

A second model is the politicised bureaucracy model according to which political office bearers have the mandate to control the public service. In this context, there is no distinction between administration and politics and between parties and the state. Political structures impose administrative decisions on administrators. The model implies that rewards and appointments are made on the basis of party political allegiance to the ruling party, and not on the basis of merit (Mafunisa 2003:87–88). A relevant example of this model is the cadre deployment strategy of the ANC (ANC 1997). Elements of the cadre deployment policy emphasise the appointment from within the party and potential appointees are made to understand and accept the basic policies and programmes of the ANC. Political and ideological training given to cadres should enable them to exercise political leadership and be organisers in their respective departments (ANC 1997).

Mafunisa (2003:87–88) is of the view that ANC cadres should undergo training which includes patriotism and the inculcation of attributes such as loyalty, discipline, dedication and determination. Members of the ANC are expected to be ready to serve in any capacity. This means that the governing party has to ensure that people who are committed to the party's transformation agenda occupy senior positions in the three spheres of government (Mafunisa 2003:87–88). Thus, senior positions in government, especially those of directors-general, chief directors and directors, become political appointments. The practice of political appointments by the governing party is no different from the practice of the previous political dispensation where members of the Broederbond were appointed to senior positions in the public service (Van der Westhuizen *et al.* 2011:170–172). Section 195(4) of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* makes provision for political appointments: "The appointment in public administration of a number of persons on policy considerations is not precluded, but national legislation should regulate these appointments in the public service." Although the intentions of this constitutional provision are clear, corrupt public functionaries could use it to further their own political agendas, thus depriving the public service of competent and qualified candidates. The



challenge in this regard is how to manage the relationship between politicians and public servants in a manner that ensures that public servants are not abused for narrow political agendas, but remain the instruments for effective service delivery to the public (Mafunisa 2003:87–88).

## **The impact of institutional politics on the selection process**

Institutional politics involves behaviours that others perceive as self-serving tactics for personal gain at the expense of other people and possibly the institution (Mc Shane and Von Glinow 2005:375). Institutional politics usually has negative consequences for employees and the institution. For employees it means lower job satisfaction, inadequate commitment to the institution and high levels of work-related stress. For the institution it means that its resources are not being utilised effectively (Mc Shane and Von Glinow 2005:375).

Institutional politics seem to be rife under certain conditions. When resources are scarce and budgets are cut, people often rely on political tactics to safeguard their resources and maintain the status quo. Problems may also arise when decisions relating to resource allocation are ambiguous, complex or lack formal rule (Mc Shane and Von Glinow 2007:186). These authors argue that the abovementioned conditions occur because decision makers are given too much discretion over resource allocation. Potential recipients of those resources are inclined to use political tactics to influence the factors that should be considered in the decision. If an employee has a greater urge for personal power than social power he or she may seek power for its own sake and use political tactics to acquire more power (Mc Shane and Von Glinow 2007:186). Institutional change encourages political behaviour because it creates uncertainty and ambiguity as the institution moves from the old order and practices to a new era. During these times, employees apply political strategies to protect their valued resources, positions and self-image (Heiffner and Rentsch 2001).

Motsoeneng (2011:66) argues that selection committees are inclined to appoint candidates who are less qualified than the members of the committees so as to protect their own interest and maintain the status quo. Trevor Manuel, Minister in the Presidency, highlighted this point when he argued that the right person should be appointed in the right position irrespective of political interference because public servants should not serve their political masters but rather they should serve all citizens (Sowetan-on-line 2013:1). This is in conflict with the principle proposed in the national development plan, namely that the political principal should be the one who selects the suitable candidate for appointment (Republic of South Africa 2012:414).

Literature in the field reveals that recruitment policies and practices in the public service are influenced, to a great extent, by political considerations

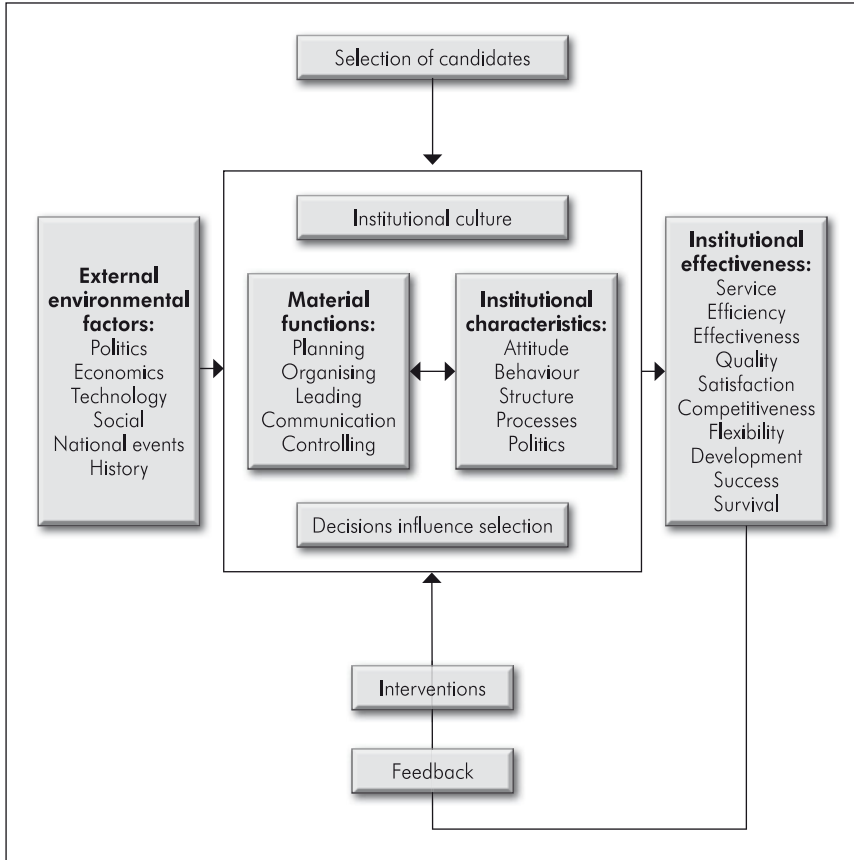
(Public Service Commission Report 2011:57). The result is that most qualified candidates are not selected (Public Service Commission 2011:10). This in turn, hampers effective and smooth operation of public service institutions. In short, far too many public servants are influenced by the political power of the dominant group. In any case, the quality of candidates recruited is seldom as high as might have been anticipated. This is mainly due to political interference and recruitment practices in the public service. If there were no political interference in the appointment of candidates and if recruitment practices were such that they would guarantee the choice of best qualified and competent candidates, great progress would have been made in the direction of improving the quality of public officials.

## **MODEL TO IMPROVE SELECTION IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE**

Figure 1 illustrates a selection model that may be used to ensure that decisions taken during the selection process, resulting in the appointment of competent and qualified candidates. The figure shows that the external environmental factors have an impact on the institutional effectiveness since these factors influence the utilisation of employees' abilities to perform optimally. The social imperatives of government should play a prominent role in the decision-making process of the selection committee. However, there should be a balance between appointing a designated candidate and upholding institutional effectiveness. The institutional culture portrays the interaction that takes place between the managerial functions and institutional characteristics. This is at the heart of selection process, where decisions are taken regarding the appointment of candidates. The candidates' abilities and competencies are aligned with the post requirements. Those who are closely aligned with the inherent requirement of the post should be the most likely ones to be considered. These candidates would portray the right institutional cultural characteristics (Cook 2009:65–66).

Institutional politics is likely to affect decisions regarding the appointments of candidates. External environmental and internal institutional factors influence the institutional effectiveness. Members of the selection committee should realise that their decisions have a direct impact on the institution's effectiveness for which they are accountable. Institutional effectiveness also includes staff orientation, training and development which ensure that candidates are adequately prepared to execute their duties and functions (Gibson, Ivancevich and Donnelly 1994:64–65). Employees who do not achieve according to the acceptable performance levels after undergoing the necessary training should be subject to additional institutional interventions (on-the-job and off-the-job learning, mentoring and coaching) (Van Der Westhuizen *et al.* 2011:334–336).

**Figure 1: Selection process model (adapted from Gibson et al. 1994)**



Source Gibson et al. (1994:64)

Such interventions allow the institution to go the extra mile in providing for the learning, training and development of all employees.

In public institutions human resources remains a vital resource in providing effective services. The effectiveness of resources depends on the potential of the people that use them (Drucker 1992:81–82). Through people the other resources are utilised more effectively to achieve institutional goals (Smit and Gerber 2002:10). However, the challenge is to attract and retain competent and qualified employees who possess the minimum competencies, abilities and qualifications as prescribed by the job prescription (Smit and Gerber 2002:10). Competent employees are needed because they have the necessary skills, knowledge and expertise to perform above the required standards

(Morse 2011:1). Cook (2009:284–285) also argues that competent and qualified employees are more productive than those who are less qualified. Drucker (1992:82) emphasises that competent employees effectively achieve institutional goals, add value and contribute to the overall effectiveness of the institution. Cook (2009:283) and Van Dijk (2008:389) claim that as the competition for scarcity of skills intensify it becomes more difficult for the public service to compete with the private sector. If current employees do not meet the required standards, the choices are either to develop or empower them so that they grow to meet the required standards, or give them a creative career redirection opportunity. From the above it is clear that selection determines the overall quality of the institution's human resources (Gómez-Mejía, Balkin and Cardy 2010:198). It is therefore imperative for public institutions to attract, appoint and retain competent and qualified employees whose culture is compatible with that of the institution.

The composition of the selection committee should be representative of race and gender (Van der Westhuizen 2005:63). It should include the immediate line manager and representative(s) from the relevant department or unit. The human resources department's representative and the relevant support department or unit should also be part of the selection committee. The union representative should be present and any other representative that is unique to the institution's profile. The chairperson should be at least one rank higher than the candidate that appears before the selection committee (Public Service Commission 2010:12–13).

The selection committee should ensure that candidates meet the post requirements as advertised. The selection committee should steer clear of using their political influence in appointing candidates. Such political interference implies that the selection committee has omitted considering competent and qualified candidates. Consequently, more of the institution's resources will have to be used to train, develop and empower the candidate and the candidate will only contribute to the effectiveness of the institution at a much later period (Cook 2009:284–285).

It is assumed that senior officials are experienced in making the right selection decisions. The question is: Where did they get training from and who trained them? It is therefore imperative that members of selection committees be trained to avoid general selection errors such as the halo effect, appointing people like oneself, stereotyping, making snap decisions, making assumptions, first-impression error and contrast effect (Foot and Hook 2008:179–181). These authors are of the view that training would empower selection members to gather sufficient information, involve trained people in interviews and allow sufficient time for interviews (Foot and Hook 2008:181–183). Cook (2009:10–12) agrees, claiming that selection members should probe mental

ability, physical characteristics, personality, knowledge and attitude and work skills of candidates. He argues that the candidate's attitude rather than only qualification should play a more prominent role in the selection process. It means that attitude, competencies and qualifications should be considered (Cook 2009:148–149).

Training on ethical behaviour is an important aspect that will enhance ethics in the public service. Ethical behaviour training interventions will influence managers' attitudes and behaviours towards appointing competent employees (Holtzhausen (2007:126). Holtzhausen (2007) further argues that a professional ethical paradigm must be followed when teaching ethics in the public service. Ethical principles should be taught in a practical manner and focus on public service ethical issues such as accountability and the place of politics in public administration.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Selection committees in the public service continue to play a critical role in the appointment of competent and qualified candidates in the South African public service. However, numerous challenges facing selection committees have been pointed out in this article. One challenge is that selection committees lack the capacity to comprehend the functions of the particular position in question and do not know how to align the candidates' abilities and competencies to the job requirements. It is suggested that those who serve on selection committees should be empowered through regular training. Such training will assist members to understand their roles and functions.

The composition of selection committees has been plagued with gender and race underrepresentation in recent times. More should be done to ensure that women and all racial groups are equally represented.

Political interference is one of the major obstacles in the appointment of qualified and competent candidates. Such interference prohibits government from appointing young people who have qualifications and whose performance can contribute to the institutional effectiveness, which translates to improved service delivery. It is suggested that public managers focus on what is in the best interest of public institutions and communities.

The proposed model could serve as a framework for public institutions in appointing competent and qualified candidates. It allows for the selection committee to holistically view the institution effectiveness within the context of broader external environment. The model provides the selection committee the opportunity to consider candidates whose abilities and competencies are closely aligned with the institution's culture.

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